

Statement of John Conyers, Jr.
Justice Department Oversight
June 6, 2001

At the outset, I want to thank the Attorney General for being here today and for the outreach he has undertaken this year. I appreciate the Attorney General's consistent efforts to maintain a dialogue with Democrats.

Mr. Attorney General, in the most respectful terms possible, I must tell you that at this early stage of your tenure that some actions of the Department have been very troubling to me and run counter to your confirmation hearing representations that you would enforce the law and run a Department free from politics.

Elected officials, like everyone in this country, deserve to be tried in the courts not smeared in the press. Sadly, when it comes to Senator Robert Torricelli, your Justice Department has been leaking like Niagara Falls.

This public flogging of Torricelli appears to have increased considerably within 48 hours of Senator Jeffords' party switch, creating an impression, true or false, that this White House and the Justice Department intends to use the criminal justice processes to retake the Senate.

There is one way you can help relieve that impression – that is to follow the precedent established by your predecessor, Republican Attorney General Dick Thornburgh in the first Bush Administration. When the Department leaked damaging information and innuendo on a member of Congress from the other party, he conducted a thorough investigation, using polygraph examinations, which ultimately discovered the source and relieved him of his duties.

This becomes especially important given the fact that you commented on the Torricelli matter in a fundraising letter, using the unfortunate word “corruption,” that you sent out last year. Anything less than a duplication of the Thornburgh investigation will simply reinforce the perception, true or false, that the Department's is using the criminal justice system to re-take the Senate.

So I call on you today to conduct such an independent investigation, and would like you to address whether you will in your remarks.

I am also extremely troubled by a letter you wrote to James Jay Baker of the National Rifle Association. In this letter, you indicated that you believed in an individual, as opposed to collective, right to bear arms. In doing so, you appeared to breathe life into a Texas Judge's extreme and activist ruling that the Brady Law's prohibition on wife beaters having guns is unconstitutional under the Second Amendment.

We need to know whether this means that you believe the Brady Act and Assault Weapons Ban are unconstitutional and whether the Department will now take that position in the Texas *Emerson* case.

I am also troubled by the daily prayer sessions that you lead at your federal, public office. I'm glad you pray, I do too. But I wonder whether you have the sensitivity to see the other side. Such prayer sessions in your office can create an atmosphere where people feel silently ostracized if they don't participate, where there's an unspoken rule that compatibility with their boss depends on their participating in his faith. Can't you see how some people would feel as a result that they have to choose between job and faith?

In your confirmation hearings you said "The Attorney General must lead a professional, non-partisan Justice Department that is uncompromisingly fair, defined by integrity and dedicated to upholding the rule of law." I hope today we can discuss to what extent these actions I have described live up to these ideals.